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ABSTRACT

In 1995, the Ontario government required the establishment of school councils. Although the government provided guidance, little of its information was based on systematic knowledge that is problem-focused, applied, and empirical. To fill that need, a study sought to estimate the nature and extent of influence of councils on schools several years after implementation. The study was designed to describe the group processes that distinguish those school councils that influence schools and classrooms from those that do not. This paper describes the forms and sources of leadership that contribute significantly to the effective functioning of school councils and examines evidence on school councils, the nature of council effects on students and teachers, the conditions accounting for school council effects, council decision-making processes, and school council leadership. For the study a three-stage research design was used to achieve the five objectives under consideration. The results indicate that school councils do not add value to the empowerment of parents, the technical work of schools, or the development of students. In terms of effectiveness, evidence from the study suggests that, at best, the influence of councils on school and classroom practices is unlikely to be more than mildly positive. (Contains approximately 70 references.) (RJM)

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Do School Councils Matter?[1]

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Abstract

Survey and interview data were collected through a two-staged, mixed-methods, research design in order to examine the effects, on schools and classrooms, of school councils formed in response to a large bundle of government reform initiatives in Ontario. Results suggested that, at best, councils had a weak positive influence on both classroom practice and school-wide decisions. Councils which were relatively influential had, among other features, highly competent parent chairs, facilitative principals who wanted the councils to be useful to their schools, and a history of productive working relationships between teachers and parents.

Do School Councils Matter?

As an essential feature of most forms of site-based management (SBM), school councils have been mandated widely by governments in North America, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and many other developed countries over the past ten years. This has been done for a large number of specific reasons; for example, achieving greater efficiency in the use of resources (Elmore, 1993), enhancing parental support for schools (Hallinger, et al, 1992), increasing teacher morale, ownership, and commitment (Weiss, et al, 1992), and democratizing the school workplace (Malen & Ogawa, 1992). But in virtually all cases, these specific purposes have been considered instrumental to the enhancement of the educational experiences of students (Coleman, 1987; Brown, 1990). While this long term focus on the quality of teaching and learning almost always has been the espoused rationale for implementing SBM and school councils, demonstrable successes are relatively rare (Malen & Ogawa, 1992; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998).

The Ontario government's requirement that schools establish councils was initiated through a policy memorandum in April 1995, with September 1996 as the official start-up date. Most schools and school systems had been pursuing the implementation of this mandate for about two to two and one half years at the time of our research, with guidance and resources from the Ministry of Education and Training, along with whatever advice they had been able to collect from experienced colleagues and the professional literature (e.g., Dukacz & McCarthy, 1995), of which there was considerable. Very little of this advice, however, was informed by the type of systematic knowledge base that problem-focused, applied, empirical research is capable of providing. Contributing to such a knowledge base was the general purpose of our study. More specifically, the study aimed to estimate the nature and extent of influence of councils on schools after several years of implementation, and

to identify the conditions under which school councils make positive contributions to classroom and school-wide practices. The study also was designed to describe the group processes that distinguish those school councils which influence schools and classrooms from those that do not. A final purpose of the study was to describe the forms and sources of leadership that contribute significantly to the effective functioning of school councils.

Review of Existing Evidence

An approximately exhaustive sample of the English-language empirical literature published between 1985 and 1995 relevant to these objectives recently has been reviewed in two papers. One of these papers summarized the results of 83 studies concerning the forms and effects of SBM and school councils (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). A sub-set of these studies (66) provided evidence about obstacles to SBM and school council implementation, along with strategies for overcoming such obstacles (Leithwood & Menzies, in press).

SBM and associated school councils typically take one of three different forms, although hybrids are not uncommon (Murphy & Beck, 1995). These forms are distinguished primarily by who has greatest decision-making power and include "Administrative Control", "Professional Control", and "Community Control" forms. Although Ontario school councils have been restricted to an advisory role, the majority representation awarded to parents and guardians on these councils locates them closest to a form of council described in the literature as Community Control. Accordingly, evidence concerning this form in particular will be emphasized in the remainder of this section which reviews the literature about two matters. First, evidence about the effects of Community Control-type school councils on students and teachers is reviewed. Then a synopsis is provided of the knowledge available as a point of departure in relation to each of the five objectives for this study.

Nature of Council Effects On Students and Teachers

There is a modest amount of evidence that Community Control forms of SBM and their associated councils have had such positive effects on or for students as altering patterns of student achievement (Robertson, Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1995), increasing levels of security in schools for students (Easton & Storey, 1994), and increasing students' levels of expectations for their own achievement (Easton & Storey, 1994; Male & Merchant, 1995; Robertson, Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1995). Negative effects on students, such as declining achievement, also have been reported in at least four studies (Brown, 1990; Herman & Herman, 1993; Robertson, Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1995; Smylie, Lazarus & Brownlee-Conyers, 1995).

A number of positive effects on teachers of this form of SBM and council have been reported, as well, including greater collaboration and sharing of information (Middleton, Smith & Williams, 1993), greater focus on client satisfaction (Robertson, Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1995), changes in classroom instruction (Male & Merchant, 1995; Robertson, Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1995), and less turnover (Robertson & Kwong, 1994). Additional effects reported in the literature include increased commitment, excitement, and morale (Davies, 1993; Middleton, Smith & Williams, 1993; Murphy, 1995), and increased accountability (Middleton, Smith & Williams, 1993; Murphy, 1995; Male & Merchant, 1995). At least six studies have reported such negative effects on teachers as heavier workload (Easton & Bennett, 1993; Flinspach & Ryan, 1994; Odden, 1995; Radnofsky, 1994; Sebring et al., 1995; Bishop & Mulford, in press).

Conditions Accounting for School Council Effects

School conditions. Two overlapping sets of school-level factors which appear to influence the effectiveness of councils can be found in the recent literature. One set of factors has emerged from and is supported by the results of empirical study.

Another more speculative set has arisen through efforts to bring conceptual coherence to these results.

In the empirical literature, the most frequently cited obstacles to the development of an effective school council are power struggles and political conflict (Flinspach & Ryan, 1994), lack of council role definition(Furtwengler et al., 1995), difficulty in recruiting parent members, and lack of training for members (Vasquez, 1991). Commonly identified strategies for addressing these obstacles include provision of training (Ovando, 1994), and creation of a committee structure, principally teacher teams, to assist the council (Odden 1995). Clarification of council roles and tasks (Jenni, 1991), provision of substantial power to the council (Odden & Odden 1994); and provision of greater sources of information (Odden & Odden 1994) also have been identified as strategies for implementing school councils. Some evidence suggests that an "instructional guidance" system serves to focus the council on teaching and learning (Wohlstetter, Smyer & Mohrman, 1994).

While the empirical evidence about obstacles and strategies is relatively extensive in quantity, the research designs used in its production do not establish robust causal links between the strategies which foster the implementation of effective councils and the subsequent contributions of these councils to teaching and learning. Some promising theoretical work on this problem has been reported by Wohlstetter and her colleagues (e.g., Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994; Mohrman, Wohlstetter, & associates, 1994) who themselves rely heavily on Lawler's (1986) conception of the "high-involvement" or high performance organization. According to this perspective, the promise of SBM and school councils is to be found in the stimulation of more participative forms of management and greatly increased involvement of those lower in the organizational hierarchy. Lawler's work adds up to a persuasive case that these changes have a significant effect on such key determinants of organizational effectiveness as employee motivation, satisfaction,

acceptance of change, problem-solving expertise, and quality of communication (see also Wall and Rinehart, 1998).

Of particular interest to Wohlstetter and her colleagues has been what Lawler identifies as the four central requirements for legitimate participation - knowledge and skill, power, information, and rewards. These are what must be moved down to the lowest possible level in the hierarchy if organizations are to become more effective. Furthermore, for this to happen many or most aspects of an organization's design may need to be altered over time so as to provide a coherent and supportive context for the distribution of such knowledge, power, information and rewards.

External conditions. In addition to those school-level factors just discussed, evidence from prior research has begun to identify features of the wider context in which councils work that both inhibit and foster their effectiveness. Most of this evidence concerns parents and the school system.

A number of factors associated with parents mitigate against the effective development of councils. Some of these factors are parents' attitudes and beliefs, including: adherence to traditional roles (David, 1994; Jewell & Rosen, 1993); lack of interest in educational issues beyond the needs of their own children (David, 1994; Jenni, 1991); low expectations for children (Davies, 1993); negative attitudes concerning the role of schools in responding to social inequities (Davies, 1993); and lack of respect for and trust in teachers (Easton et al., 1991). Also depressing the development of council effectiveness are excessive demands on parents' time (Hallinger, Murphy & Hausman, 1992), and lack of meaningful contact by parents with schools (Davies, 1993).

School councils develop well when parents are clear about their roles and the goals of the council (Collins, Cooper & Whitmore, 1995), when there is encouragement for parents to become involved (Sebring et al., 1995), and when they have access to professional development for their participation (Grant, 1994). Also reported to be helpful to council development is expert knowledge among parents

about some of the issues facing councils or about effective group processes, and oral fluency (Chapman & Boyd, 1986).

Administrators and other staff working at the system level sometimes behave in ways which seriously hinder the work of school councils. Among the more often noted are failure to make available to councils the training, resources, and other support they require (Stevenson & Pellicier, 1992; Vasquez, 1991), and insufficient delegation of power (Stevenson & Pellicier, 1992; Collins, Cooper & Whitmore, 1995). Lack of willingness on the administrator's part to become less bureaucratic (Fine, 1993; Hess, 1994), and resistance to changes proposed by councils (Hess, 1995; Jenni, 1991) inhibit councils' work, as do unresolved tensions between the school system and teacher unions (David, 1994; Lopez, 1992).

School system staff promote council effectiveness by providing adequate training and other resources, establishing clear guidelines for council work, and ensuring clear communication with schools and councils about issues of mutual concern and responsibility (Vasquez, 1991; Lopez, 1992; Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995).

Effective Council Decision-making Processes

To the extent that school councils are viewed simply as a species of the genus "team" or "group", the extensive literatures on effective team learning (e.g., Janis, 1982; Ketchum & Trist, 1992) and group decision making (e.g., Brightman, 1988; Worchel, Wood, & Simpson, 1992) go some distance toward identifying the individual and collective skills members of effective school councils will need to possess or acquire and apply. In this study we asked: Do these generally applicable skills suffice or are there unique dynamics that require other skills or processes for councils to be effective?

Some of the literature already reviewed begins to suggest that councils, because they bring together both professional and client, non professional but potentially powerful members, may have such unique dynamics. For example, more than

many other types of groups, to work well councils seem to require clear and unambiguous indications of their purposes and the roles of individual members, especially parents. In a more exaggerated form than a corporate team, council members have very different backgrounds and potentially disparate and conflicting agendas. This helps explain why power struggles and political conflict are the most frequently cited obstacles to council effectiveness (e.g., Hallinger, Murphy & Hausman, 1992; Jewell & Rosen, 1993).

Research on council processes suggests that external facilitators be used in the early stages of determining council working procedures (Coe & Kannapel, 1992; Jewell & Rosen, 1993), the role of chair be explicitly outlined (Daresh, 1992), and that the principal not be the chair (Collins, Cooper & Whitmore, 1995). Council members should be given adequate information concerning the decisions they will be making (Odden, 1995; Odden & Odden, 1994), and parents and staff should play complementary roles on council (Wylie, 1995; Thomas, 1993). The effectiveness of councils is also nurtured by establishing procedures for evaluating their work (Wohlstetter, Smyer & Mohrman, 1994).

School Council Leadership

Almost all of the existing evidence concerning forms of leadership helpful in fostering the work of school councils is about the leadership provided by school principals. Indeed, principals have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to either derail community-dominated councils in order to retain decision-making control for themselves (e.g., Malen & Ogawa, 1992) or to ensure council effectiveness (Furtwengler et al., 1995 Hess, 1995; Yanguas & Rollow, 1994).

Leadership practices reported to be helpful in fostering the work of community control school councils include creating participatory decision-making structures (Odden, 1995; Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995), and fostering collaborative work among council members (Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995; Yanguas & Rollow, 1994). Clearly

defining goals and roles for parents and for the council as a whole (Odden, 1995) seems to be a helpful leadership practice, as does acting as information provider, motivator, and friend of the council (Odden, 1995; Odden & Odden, 1994). Leaders help when they encourage councils to maintain a focus on students and their learning (Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995) and when they focus their efforts on monitoring progress (Flinspach & Ryan, 1994).

Community control-type councils, such as those being implemented in Ontario, offer considerable opportunity to both extend present understandings of how those in formal leadership roles might contribute to the effectiveness of school councils, and to learn how those in other roles, especially parents, also provide leadership.

Research Design[2]

A three-stage research design was used to achieve the five objectives of the study. Each stage featured different data collection and analysis techniques in order to realize some of the strengths associated with multimethod research (Brewer & Hunter, 1989).This paper is concerned only with the results of the first two stages of the research (the third stage consists of a quantitative test of the external validity of findings from Stage Two qualitative case study data).

Stage One

The primary purpose of this stage was to identify school sites that varied in the extent to which teachers associated changes in teaching and learning in their classrooms with the efforts of their school councils. Preliminary information also was collected about the research questions and related matters. Sites were selected from schools in three school districts in Ontario. In order to be included, a district had to have at least developed its own formal policy concerning school council implementation, and provided relevant formal training for all elementary and

2 The authors acknowledge, with gratitude, the data collection and analysis assistance of Kirsten Parker, Bernie Kowalczyk, Sherrill Ryan, and Karen Edge.

secondary principals and/or vice principals. Selected districts also must have included the implementation of school councils among their board-endorsed priorities over the previous two years. These three criteria were intended to ensure that all schools involved in the first two stages of the study had received local organizational incentives for implementation.

The School Council Classroom Impact Survey was developed and distributed to approximately 3150 teachers in 95 elementary and 14 secondary schools within three districts. Included in the survey were questions about teacher awareness of school councils; the extent to which councils influence teachers' work inside and outside the classroom; characteristics of councils; and the nature of parent/school relationships.

Based on responses to these questions, three samples of schools were selected. These were schools in which a large proportion of staff: (a) believed that their school council had positive effects on some aspect of classroom practice; (b) reported negative effects on classroom practice which they attributed to their school councils; and (c) believed that school councils had made no difference to their classroom practices.

Stage Two

This stage of the study was intended to identify conditions accounting for differences perceived by teachers in the impact of school councils on classroom and school-wide practices. While previous research offers some clues as to what these factors might be, this evidence is sparse. For this reason, a "grounded" or "constant comparative" method of coding, analysis, and initial interpretation (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) of the interview data was used. These grounded interpretations then were compared to relevant concepts and theory in the previous literature as a means of providing "supplementary validation" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 52) and enhancing "explanatory validity" (Brinberg & McGrath, 1982).

The Conditions For Success Interview schedule was developed and field tested for the purposes of this stage of the study. The instrument consisted of 17 open-ended questions designed to elicit information about teachers' knowledge of their school council, its influence (or lack thereof) on their classroom work, and the roles of the principal, school system, and parents regarding the school council. Demographic information was also collected.

Non-council teachers selected from the three samples of schools, 48 teachers in total, were interviewed with this instrument. Twenty-four of these teachers were from 6 schools (four teachers per school) in which a high proportion of staff reported, during stage one of the study, positive influences on classroom practices attributable, at least in part, to the work of their school councils ("moderate influence" schools). Two samples of twelve teachers were selected from two groups of 3 schools to represent each of the other two sets of perceptions concerning school council effects (no influence and negative influence).

The weighting of this sampling plan toward schools reporting positive effects assumed that they would provide the most relevant evidence for the study. Evidence from the smaller number of schools reporting negative and no effects was used to help distinguish those variables particularly critical for positive effects.

A second purpose for this stage of the study was to reconstruct processes used for council decision making and to identify councils' initiatives. To accomplish this, up to six council members (including the principal, chair, one or two parent members, one or two teacher members, and, where applicable, one or two student reps) were interviewed. A semi-structured interview questionnaire (*The School Council Initiatives Interview*) was developed and field tested for this purpose. Results were analyzed also using the grounded techniques already described.

Because of technical difficulties, two of the 12 schools had to be removed from Stage Two analysis. A total of 97 people from 8 elementary schools and 2 secondary schools were interviewed about their school councils.

Results: Stage One

In addition to providing evidence for the selection of schools for Stage Two of the study, survey responses collected during Stage One provide insights about the general extent of school councils' influence, and the nature of that influence. These data also describe teachers' perception of parent-school relationships, and some of the conditions associated with school councils' influence.

Completed questionnaires were received from 984 elementary and 378 secondary teachers for a total sample of 1362 teachers in 92 elementary and 14 secondary schools. The response rates for elementary and secondary teachers were 49% and 35%, respectively. Analyses of survey data included calculations of frequency distributions, means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients. Before analysis of the full data set, data were aggregated at the school level to determine school means on measures of extent of parent council influence on classrooms. This allowed for the selection of schools for Stage Two, discussed below.

Extent of School Councils' Influence

Overall, teachers rated the influence of parent/school councils and associations on their work within the classroom as just above "no influence" but less than "moderately positive", a mean rating of .35 on a scale ranging from -2 (significant negative) to +2 (significant positive). Elementary teachers rated council influence significantly higher than did secondary teachers (.44 vs. .11; $p<.000$).

Council influence outside the classroom was rated somewhat higher than within-classroom influence at .44 overall, with similar differences between elementary and secondary ratings (.52 vs. .22; $p<.000$).

Nature of Council Influence

The survey estimated the nature of council's influence on classroom and school practices in two ways. One way was to ask teachers to write in descriptions of the

nature of school council influence on teaching and learning in their classrooms. Only about a third of the teachers wrote such responses, most of their comments falling into one of four broad categories. The type of activity mentioned most frequently (almost 20% of teachers) was fundraising, an initiative that indirectly influenced work in their classrooms by providing additional materials, such equipment as new computer hardware and software, or additional games for classroom use. Also mentioned were library resources, subsidized field trips, guest speakers, and other special events funded by school councils.

A second category of council activity mentioned by a minority of teachers (less than 10%) was the impact of parent volunteering, in some cases organized by the school council and, in others, as part of ongoing practice. Some volunteers worked in the classroom by providing assistance or sharing expertise. Others helped plan excursions or special events. Improved communication between parents and teachers was a third influence cited by about 5% of teachers. These teachers spoke of parents being more supportive of their work, an improvement in school spirit, and more awareness of parent wishes. Some teachers saw this increased contact with parents as increasing their accountability. A fourth area mentioned by teachers was increased parental input into school decision making, something which was most frequently associated with the school behaviour code. A few teachers referred to support for new courses or techniques, increased academic expectations or more concern about racism in curriculum.

Generally, teachers responding to the survey viewed parental influence on curriculum as indirect and limited to very few schools. The survey did not ask, nor was it clear from the written comments, just how many non-council parents were engaged with the school. Among the teachers commenting on the nature of council influence in classrooms, a small minority provided examples of negative influence such as council members lobbying for their own children at the expense of others, or council initiatives of questionable educational value.

The nature of council influence outside the classroom was perceived to be similar to that within classrooms. Only slightly more than a third of teachers provided written responses to this question, and descriptions of fund-raising was mentioned by about 18% of them. Volunteers were cited as a positive influence by 10% of teachers, although it was not always clear how much of the volunteering was directly related to fundraising and how much involved other activities within the school.

Twelve percent of respondents cited improved communication as an influence at the school level, as at the classroom level. Examples of what this meant included more community or parental support for the school and for teachers, a more positive atmosphere within the school, increased awareness about parents' concerns, and more communication with the local community.

Outside the classroom, the influence of parent involvement in school decision making around such issues as a code of behaviour or school uniforms was cited by about 5% of teachers. Finally, just under 5% of teachers provided examples of negative influence mostly related to the extra time required of teachers to administer council fundraising activities, or parents whose focus was perceived as too narrow for the benefit of the whole school.

As a second method of estimating the nature of school councils' influence, the survey asked teachers to select descriptors of their councils from 11 pairs of antonyms with one positive and one negative descriptor in each pair. The total number of positive selections was calculated for each teacher. Twenty-two per cent of teachers did not answer this question. Of the 78% of teachers who did respond, 13% selected all 11 positive descriptors (score = 11) and 10% selected only negative descriptors (score = 0). On average, teachers selected 6.1 positive descriptors (SD = 3.6), although elementary teachers at 6.6 selected significantly more positive descriptors than did secondary teachers at 4.6 descriptors ($p<.000$). Overall, teachers were only slightly more likely to select a positive as opposed to a negative descriptor.

The positive descriptor selected most frequently was "supportive", which was selected by just over 57% of teachers compared with only 10% who thought councils were "intrusive" and 33% who did not select either option. More than half the teachers also thought their councils were "constructive" (54%) and "helpful" (54%) with only 6% selecting "destructive" and 12% "unhelpful". Teachers were least likely to characterize their councils as "educational" (32%) or "stimulating" (28%).

When responses of elementary and secondary teachers were compared, elementary teachers characterized school councils more positively than did secondary teachers; 5 positive features were selected by a majority of elementary teachers, whereas only 1 was selected by a majority of secondary teachers. On average, secondary teachers made more negative selections (26% vs. 17%) or were more likely to not respond (42% vs. 36%) than their elementary colleagues. However, when positive characteristics were rank-ordered separately for elementary and secondary teachers by frequency of selection, most characteristics were within one or two ranks on both lists, i.e., both groups tended to perceive their councils in the same way. The main exception to this pattern was the council's visibility; 53% of elementary and 20% of secondary teachers thought their councils were visible, whereas 19% elementary and 50% secondary thought they were invisible. This greater awareness of councils in elementary schools also was reflected in elementary teachers' more frequent characterization of councils as "close" (44% vs. 18%), rather than "distant" (22% vs. 46%).

Although negative choices were always a minority, perhaps the most telling evidence is the percentage of no responses, which combined with negative choices account for the majority of teachers for 8 descriptors. Overall, a large percentage of teachers chose not to respond to this item for reasons that we can only speculate about. Where opinions were expressed, nine characteristics attracted more positive choices and two attracted more negative choices. However, the relatively low response rate for the item resulted in only three positive characteristics being

selected by a majority of teachers. The pattern of responses for this question suggest ambiguity about the nature of the school council, an ambiguity felt more strongly in secondary than in elementary schools.

Parent-School Relationships

Parents' relationships with the school were the focus of another question in the survey asking teachers to characterize that relationship using the same format as the question above. The overall mean number of positive choices was 4.21 (SD = 2.09) of the potential 7 choices. Although, on average, elementary teachers chose more positive characteristics than did secondary teachers (4.51 vs. 3.4) and a higher percentage chose the positive option within each pair, the pattern of choices was the same for both groups. Approximately 60% of teachers thought parents were *supportive, satisfied* and *trusting*. On the other hand, only about a third thought the relationship was *close* and *active*. The differences between elementary and secondary teachers were greatest in the least positive categories; a much higher percentage of elementary teachers than their secondary colleagues was likely to see parents as involved (46 vs. 27), close (43 vs. 17) and active (37 vs. 17).

Conditions Associated with Council Influence

Ratings of council influence inside and outside the classroom were correlated with perceptions of school councils and demographic features to see whether there were relationships between influence and the other variables. Table 1 reports the correlation coefficients separately for the total sample, elementary, and secondary teachers, although for most relationships the pattern was similar for both groups of teachers.

In sum, these results suggest that the influence of school councils is:

- moderately related with the extent of teachers' awareness of council; the more teachers are aware of their council, the more likely they are to report a positive

influence of the school council on their work both within and outside the classroom;

- moderately related with teachers' perceptions of councils as a positive factor; the more positive characteristics teachers attribute to their council, the more likely they are to report positive influences of councils on their work;
- weakly related with teachers' perceptions of parent relationships with school; the more positive teachers' are about parent/school relationships, the more likely they are to report positive council influence on their work;
- not related with the socio-economic background of the majority of students. An exception is the relatively weak relationship between influence in the classroom and socioeconomic status (SES); elementary teachers who rated student SES higher were also more likely to report council influence inside the classroom;
- weakly related with staff size; the smaller the staff the more likely teachers were to report council influence. However, elementary teachers in larger schools were slightly more likely to report influence within the classroom;
- weakly related with number of years in the school and length of teaching experience; teachers with more years in their current school and/or more teaching experience reported more council influence. But these relationships were mostly quite weak and inconsistent across the sample.

Results: Stage Two

Interview data are reported in this paper for teachers and parents in the ten schools included in our study. Using the data from these ten schools, this section addresses questions about conditions associated with school councils' influence on school and classroom practice, the characteristics of council functioning, and principal leadership. Of particular interest about each of these matters are

differences between the schools that account for differences in the degree of influence exhibited.

Estimating Variation in Councils' Influence

Both survey and interview data were collected for the purpose of estimating councils' influence on school and classroom practices. The ten schools selected for analysis in this paper provided responses to the two relevant survey questions suggesting that Schools H, B, G, A F, and E had councils that were at least moderately influential, whereas Schools I, C, J, and D had councils that had either neutral or negative effects. This evidence is summarized in Table 2. Schools are rank ordered according to overall influence from most (1) to least (9).

While the survey data determined the initial choice of the ten schools for qualitative study, questions about school and classroom influence were asked during the interviews, as well. Table 3 summarizes this evidence concerning the extent of councils' influence provided by respondents in each of the ten schools. (All schools had 10 respondents except School H with nine and School F with eight). Two columns summarize evidence about councils' influence on schools and two provide comparable evidence about councils' influence on classrooms. Columns 1 and 3 report the number of respondents who reported their councils to have "some" to "a lot" of influence and the ranking of the 10 schools in terms of council influence (1= highest ranking). Columns 2 and 4 report the number of respondents who claimed either not to know of their council's influence or that their council had no influence. Schools are ranked in each of the columns (1= fewest number of the respondents). The fifth column in this table reports the mean of the four rankings for each of the ten schools. They are listed in order: most influence to least. For purposes of subsequent comparison, schools H, B, G, A, and E are considered to have "moderate influence" councils. Schools I, J, D, C, and B are considered to have "low influence" councils.

Interview results largely corroborate survey results regarding influence, except for School B. Its council is reported to be less influential than survey results suggested. This discrepancy may be due to survey respondents reporting on the activities of the previous parent organization instead of the current council. The interview data more accurately reflect the influence of the council, itself.

Conditions Associated with Influential School Councils

School conditions. This section reports evidence about school conditions affecting the functioning and eventual influence of councils in all schools, as well as those school conditions which distinguish moderate from low influence councils. Across all ten schools a total of 23 conditions affecting the work and influence of councils were identified. The number of interviewees mentioning each of these conditions ranged from a low of two to a high of 57 out of a possible total of 97 interviewees. The five top ranked items were mentioned by at least 42 people.

Among the five most frequently mentioned conditions, four stress the nature of the involvement of parents in the life of the school. These conditions include: the extent to which parents were active in non-council work in the school (57 mentions) - fundraising, volunteering in classrooms, and the like; the existence of a strong parent group in the school prior to the establishment of council (52); the extent to which parents have a supportive attitude toward the school (42); and the nature of the relationship between the council and staff (42). The other frequently mentioned condition was related to the amount of council information held by non-council teachers (44 mentions). The perception that council doesn't deal with teaching practices or hasn't tried to influence classroom work was mentioned by 34 interviewees.

Of the five most frequently mentioned conditions, three were also conditions which showed marked differences between moderate and low influence school councils. One of these conditions was the degree of parent involvement in a wide

range of activities in the school. Thirty respondents associated with moderate influence councils said that parents were very active; one said that parents were not. In contrast, only 12 respondents associated with low influence councils reported high parental activity, and 14 explicitly indicated the lack of such activity. In fact, several respondents associated with low influence councils reported guardedness or even hostility between parents and staff. For example, the principal in one of those schools said:

> *When I got here two years ago I really had the feeling that there was a we-they, staff versus parents [attitude]. A lot of staff still don't like volunteers in their classroom. I still get the odd complaint that so and so is in the school an awful lot and she's overhearing things she shouldn't be overhearing.*

While it was not among the five most frequently mentioned conditions, a still frequently identified condition (29) was the extent to which parents in general and council parents in particular were simply present and visible in the school. Twenty-two interviewees associated with moderate influence councils indicated strong parental presence in the school, whereas only one interviewee associated with a low influence council did so. In addition, six low influence council respondents specifically mentioned the lack of such a presence.

The relationship between staff and council was the second frequently mentioned condition which also differentiated between moderate and low influence school councils. Good communication, a high degree of trust, and lack of conflict were cited by 30 interviewees associated with moderate influence councils. One member of this group said there was not a good relationship. In contrast, among those associated with low influence councils, only four claimed the existence of a good relationship and seven described poor relationships.

Non-council teachers being well-informed about council activities was the third condition distinguishing moderate from low influence councils. It was mentioned positively by twice as many people associated with the moderate as compared with low influence councils (18 vs. 9). Further, two interviewees in the moderate influence group specifically referred to the absence of information, whereas 15 people in the low influence group did so. As one teacher said:

> *I have no recall of any formal presentations being made, for example, at a staff meeting... you know, the date of the meetings. It's the kind of date you would notice on the school newsletter for the month, but, other than that, you are not well-informed as to what stage we are at in this school.*

Other conditions which differentiated the groups were the ease with which students and staff were recruited for membership (14 moderate; 9 low); the provision of funds for the school in general (13 moderate; 3 low); and a hesitant attitude toward the concept of school councils on the part of the staff (0 moderate; 8 low). Finally, members associated with all moderate influence school councils said that staff had provided information to council; four members associated with only one low influence school council said this.

Conditions external to the school. Interviewees identified a large number of specific conditions external to the school which, they believed, were consequential for the councils' work. In about 60% of the cases, interviewees talked about such conditions having negative effects on councils. Many of these conditions were readily classified according to three of the four "tools" required for authentic participation which Wohlstetter and associates (1994) claim account for variation in the impact of site-based management on classroom teaching and learning. These are information, knowledge and skill, and power. A fourth closely related category,

nature and extent of parent and community participation , encompassed the remainder of the conditions mentioned.

While 34% of all interviewees said that some information was provided by the board and/or Ministry, 53% said it wasn't specific enough. More information was needed concerning the roles and responsibilities of council members. Respondents also wanted clearer Ministry guidelines including explicit parameters for advising school administration.

Access to knowledge and skill was viewed by respondents largely through the lens of the training available to help them carry out their role. The majority of comments about such training, as it was provided by their school district, suggested that there was plenty of it (48 mentions). Some complained, however, that district workshops were "short on content and long on process" (13). Seven comments reflected dissatisfaction with times and location of courses.

With respect to power, most comments (130) were about the distribution of power between school councils and either the elected board of trustees as a whole, or individual trustees, as well as the Ministry. Opinions about the adequacy of this distribution were mixed. Sixty-one comments were essentially negative in nature, dealing with such matters as lack of trustee responsiveness to council on some issues, isolation from the board, differences of opinion about what should be the focus of council work, and the local trustee's apparent lack of interest in the school's and the council's initiatives. Eight of those comments reflected external political issues (work-to-rule and religious affiliation of council membership) which delayed the start-up of two councils. Seven people talked about the hardships for education, in general, due to the plethora of changes recently initiated by the provincial government. And 22 interviewees commented on the limited power and responsibility granted to councils due to district and Ministry mandates.

Sixty-nine comments about the distribution of power were positive, however. These pointed to district endorsement of, and support for, school councils, district

responsiveness to council initiatives, and close communication between the council and the local trustee. Nineteen respondents believed that the council acted as an advocate for the school with the district.

The nature and amount of participation by parents and the wider community in the council, and in the school as a whole, encompassed the remainder of the comments about external conditions. Of the 130 comments about such participation, about two thirds (88) were negative and one third (42) positive in nature. The single largest concern about participation of parents in school councils was difficulty in recruiting parents. Forty-two people mentioned this as a problem, while sixteen claimed it was not. Other concerns about parent participation focused on their lack of knowledge about council activity and disappointment about poor attendance at council meetings. More positively, some respondents mentioned parents calling council chairs about child-related problems. Comments were made, as well, about the wider community. On a positive note were comments about the helpfulness of local businesses, strong links between the school and the wider community, and the council's role in helping to bring the community together to accomplish things. Communities divided by differences in economic welfare were viewed as challenging for councils to work in, whereas stable middle class communities were viewed as especially trouble-free contexts for council work.

The questions remain: Do relatively high influence councils differ from councils with less influence with respect to the external conditions in which they work? Could these conditions help account for variation in council influence? Our data indicate important differences between the two groups of schools on several dimensions. More than twice as many respondents associated with the low influence councils (22 vs. 10) reported lack of information from either board or Ministry sources as a problem that was insurmountable. Almost twice as many specifically mentioned the lack of clear guidelines as an obstacle. Moderate influence councils were reported as more likely to set their own goals and

guidelines in the absence of formal mandates. In terms of power distribution, moderate influence councils were reported to have better relationships with their boards; there was more communication between council and board; and boards were more responsive to their needs. Finally, in terms of relationships with community, the moderate influence councils had less difficulty recruiting parents for membership and more involvement with the community in general. At least one person associated with each of the moderate influence councils (9 people in all) described the council as the first contact for parents needing to interact with the school; only one person associated with one of the low influence councils did so. None of the respondents associated with moderate influence councils described their community as economically disadvantaged whereas six people associated with low influence councils did.

School Council Processes

When respondents were asked to describe their school councils, they spoke about council routines, membership characteristics, communication procedures, and problem-solving processes. While many of the points raised are common across both groups, it seems that moderate influence councils usually demonstrated more positive characteristics and more fully developed processes than low influence councils.

Routines and membership characteristics. Regarding routines and membership characteristics, all councils were reported to hold regular, once-a-month meetings that lasted from one and a half to two hours. These meetings were guided by an agenda (usually developed by the chair and principal), minutes, and regular reports from the principal. Eight of the ten councils reportedly set agendae well in advance of the meetings giving participants adequate time for preparation and consultation with others as needed. However, the agenda in two low influence council schools was usually announced at the beginning of the council meeting. Meetings were

completely open to anyone who wished to attend and parents filled the main roles of chair, secretary and treasurer. One moderate influence council was co-chaired by a principal and a parent.

Most members believed that parent and staff members complemented each other because of their different perspectives. However, one member in each of two low influence councils pointed to a conflict. The chair of one claimed that *"...[staff] have a different outlook and we've had to deal with that this year, clarifying that, yes, principals always did that, but now there is a different thrust toward responsibility as far as councils [are concerned]."* There was across-the-board agreement that leadership was generally shared and that all members were considered to be equal.

Council members reported favorably on the work of their council colleagues and most noted that several members had taken courses to help with their council work. Members experienced satisfaction from feeling that they were doing an important job, although, in the low influence councils, seven members described negative feelings particularly around whether or not they were being taken seriously. There was also frustration expressed about membership turnover each fall with the accompanying losses in information and momentum.

Most school council members believed that their meetings were well run, well organized, and productive. Everyone had input and no one (except for one low influence council member) felt inhibited about making their views known. Opinions were mixed about the formality of meetings. Either formal or informal seemed to be acceptable, except to the principal of one low influence school who wished his council meetings were more structured. Most members felt that their perception of the council's goal was shared by the other members.

Moderate influence councils differed from low influence councils with respect to three features of council routines. First, 21 members of moderate influence councils said they were clear about their roles and responsibilities; there were no negative comments. In contrast, members of three low influence councils claimed not to

have much role differentiation or there was confusion about roles and responsibilities. When asked specifically, nine members of the moderate influence teams said they would welcome clarification of roles and responsibilities, whereas 25 members of the low influence group said that such clarification was necessary. Second, none of the moderate influence schools, and four of the five low influence schools, had members who complained that meetings were spaced too far apart to function effectively. To circumvent this problem, the moderate influence councils called emergency meetings and polled members by phone. Third, members of moderate influence councils reported that their group worked well together; there were no power struggles and no special interest groups had taken charge. Members were compatible, respected each other, and got along well. On the other hand, members of four of the low influence councils reported friction among members and the existence of "blockers" on their councils. One council had difficulty amalgamating a prior parent association with the newer school council, resulting in unresolved hard feelings. One council had to deal with "single agenda" parents.

Communication. Communication procedures identified by respondents encompassed the ways in which council informed school staffs and parents of what transpired at council meetings. Two schools in the moderate influence group had their own council newsletters. One of these schools used an extensive information and communication delivery system, including its own newsletter to all parents every month sent home with the "youngest or only". Although every school had a principal's newsletter that included some information about the council (but sometimes only the date of the next meeting), communication was poor from three of the low influence councils. People either did not know about or did not make use of the fact that minutes and agendae were normally available on request and were posted on a bulletin board outside the office in one of the schools, for example. Reports of adequate information sharing by staff representatives on council were mixed.

Problem-solving processes. Problem-solving processes mentioned by interviewees included structuring the council for problem solving; problem-solving leadership; pre-planning processes; goal setting and issues-identification processes; means of ensuring that all council members' opinions are considered during the meeting; conflict resolution strategies; and final decision-making strategies. Interviewees also mentioned processes for responding to obstacles or constraints, processes for evaluating council meeting effectiveness, and processes for collecting information from those outside of council.

With respect to these processes, moderate influence councils usually demonstrated higher levels of development. Members of moderate influence councils more frequently reported addressing issues that encompassed all of their schools' concerns. They also made decisions through consensus rather than by majority vote, whenever possible. Fourteen of these members (in contrast to 6 of the low influence members) reported being able to make a smooth transition from the existing parent group to the current school council. Eleven moderate influence interviewees felt that there were no obstacles that could not be overcome; only two members of one low influence council felt this way. Twenty-two members of moderate influence councils talked about the use of committees for their work; only nine low influence members did so. Twice as many moderate influence members said their councils set goals, usually by brainstorming.

A lot of the credit for the reportedly superior problem-solving processes of moderate influence councils was attributed to the council chairs who were perceived to provide remarkable leadership for council problem solving. The leadership skills of these chairs were praised by virtually all of the members of each of their teams (and some non-members as well). Two of the low influence councils also were unanimous in their praise; one team had mixed opinions; and two felt that their chairs did not provide adequate leadership. Leadership consisted of "knowing how the school worked", being especially knowledgeable about the issues

being addressed by council; being "thorough and responsible"; being well-organized; ensuring that council had access to the information it needed for decision making; and keeping the group on track during the meetings.

Perhaps the most important difference between moderate and low influence councils was indicated by the response to the question of whether or not they felt that council members had a clear sense of what they were trying to accomplish. Twenty-two people in the moderate influence group said they were very clear; five said they weren't sure. The opinions of the low influence group members were nearly reversed. Six people in this group said they knew what they wanted to accomplish while 25 said they were still trying to figure out what they were supposed to do. Generally the difference resided in the ability of moderate influence councils to set their own goals. The response of a teacher member of one moderate influence council summed up much of what accounts for her council's success.

> *I think [what we want to accomplish] is very clear because we set out the initiatives; we have the agenda to follow. And we agree on what those are; we revisit those and see how they are going. It's not that every meeting new things are talked about and then never brought up again; we go back to the previous minutes and check them over to see if there are any items missing. So there's always follow through; there's always monitoring to see, okay we said this was important, these were the steps, let's evaluate. So nothing is really lost like a concern that is raised.*

Contrast that with the following remarks by a parent in a low influence council which is waiting for someone else to set the parameters. You can hear the frustration.

Our [training sessions] are just meetings and they kind of give you ideas on how to work with one another. Even they don't know [in] what direction we should be going. We never really got a clear idea. Give us the answer. What are we supposed to be doing? Are we supposed to be sticking our nose in that far only to be told by the community to get out or do we just worry about little things such as fund raising and the kids need new equipment here and there, small things, books for the school, whatever. If that is what we are supposed to be doing then tell us that. But don't leave us kind of in the dark.

Principal Leadership

Consistent with prior research, evidence from this study suggested that principals played a dominant role in most school councils. Table 4 summarizes data concerning the nature of their role in the ten schools as perceived by teachers and council members. The left hand column of the table lists 16 council-related practices associated by teacher and council interviewees with principals in these schools. The remaining columns indicate, for each school separately, the number of interviewees, excluding the principal, who mentioned each of these practices. Totals are given for moderate and low influence councils.

Some leadership practices were much more evident to respondents than others. The practices in Table 4 fall into three distinct categories - frequently mentioned (24-53 times), moderately often mentioned (10 to 16 times), and infrequently mentioned (7 or fewer times). Frequently mentioned were being a source of information (number 2 in Table 4); providing leadership regarding the internal processes of the council (6); helping set the agenda (12); being a strong active supporter of the council (1); and communicating with all stakeholders about council activities (8). All of these frequently mentioned practices address the development of effective processes within council, and between council and its constituents, suggesting that this may be

the main initial challenge in developing influential councils. Moderately often mentioned practices were developing a close working relationship with the council and/or chair (7); having the final authority or being considered the key to success (13); acting as an advocate for the staff (15); asking council for input about school improvement (3); and encouraging council to focus on teaching and learning (4). The remaining practices were mentioned infrequently.

By and large, reports about the principal's role do not overtly differentiate between councils with more and less influence. However, the kind and degree of support offered by the principal to the council (item #1) does show a difference. Nearly twice as many moderate influence council interviewees reported having principals who are active supporters of the council (22 vs. 12). This kind of involvement sends a strong signal to parents and teachers that council work is important. A closely related practice which sends the same kind of message is item #11- principals let council members know their views are important. People in three of the moderate influence councils reported such behavior on the part of their principals. None of the low influence council members did so.

Each of the principals interviewed spoke, in sometimes different ways about three similar issues. One of these issues, prominant in previous research, concerned the distribution of power. On this matter all principals agreed that councils ought to have advisory powers only, as the current government policy specified. Second, principals viewed themselves as "keepers of the process" much as they were perceived by others. Even in schools where principals were especially clear about not wanting the influence of the councils to seep too far into their schools, they reported, for example, sharing information, assisting with council decision making, and communicating council activity to parents and staff.

Third, principals also identified what they understood to be the forms of leadership they exercised with the council. Of the 16 leadership practices listed in Table 4, principals themselves claimed to have engaged in 14 of them. Not

mentioned by any principals were practices numbered 13 and 16. All principals said that they were sources of information for councils (2), and actively participated in the internal council processes (6).

Summary and Discussion

Our purpose in this study was to inquire about five specific questions concerning the influence of school councils. This section summarizes the results of the study in respect to each of these questions and considers how these results compare with those reported in previous research.

Extent of School Council Influence

Overall, teachers responding to the survey carried out as part of the first stage of our study rated the influence of school councils and other forms of school/parent associations on their work within the classroom as very weak, and only slightly stronger on their work outside the classroom. Elementary teachers awarded significantly more influence to councils than did secondary teachers. With a few exceptions, case study data confirmed this weak influence of councils. Schools in which the council was having at least moderate influence showed evidence of the principal, council chair and members, and a large proportion of staff deciding to use the council in the service of purposes that were important to the school. All of the moderate influence councils were in elementary schools.

This evidence, as a whole, suggests that the potential influence of councils is likely to be narrowly constrained, varying from modestly negative to modestly positive. These modest upper and lower limits of influence are comparable to the limits of influence that reasonably can be expected from any organizational structure, structural change being a relatively weak form of organizational intervention (Elmore, 1993). This evidence suggests, further, that the extent of a school council's influence, within this narrow range, is likely to depend on how

much influence those associated with the school want it to have. There are no fundamental properties of school councils themselves that predetermine this level of influence. Rather, the value of a school council and its consequent influence, remains to be socially constructed in each school. So, when most of those associated with a council decide to give it a central role in the school, it is likely to exercise modestly positive influence on both school and classroom practices. And vice versa.

Both the modest range of potential influence of school councils, and the inevitable variation across schools in how much value they are awarded helps to explain why research to date has reported such limited consequences of implementing school councils (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998), in spite of their popularity with policy makers and other school reformers.

Nature of School Council Influence

Even though it seems unlikely that school councils will have a strong influence on school and classroom practices under the best of conditions, they may still be worth supporting as a policy initiative. This is because their influence, albeit weak, is generally positive, as our survey results suggest. "Supportive", "constructive" and "helpful" were the words chosen most frequently by survey respondents to characterize their school councils and other parent groups (councils were least likely to be described as "educational" or "stimulating", however). This weak positive influence was most often considered to be a function of the fundraising activities of parents, parent volunteers in the classroom, improved communications between teachers and parents, and greater parental involvement in school decision making.

These sources of council influence reflect prior evidence concerning different strategies for engaging parents in relationships with schools to promote the interests of students. Such strategies include, for example, helping parents to refine their parenting skills (e.g., Walberg, 1984), assisting parents with techniques for helping their children with school work at home (e.g., Redford, 1988), and providing access

to community and support services for children (e.g., Rusk, Shaw & Joong, 1994). They also include promoting better two-way communication between home and school (e.g., Epstein & Becker, 1982), involving parents in school instruction (e.g., Hedges, 1972), and using community resources to strengthen the school program (e.g., Maeroff, 1990).

Supporting parents as decision makers in the school (Wilson & Rossman, 1986), as in the case of Ontario-type school councils, also is a strategy for involving parents in schools. It is the only structural alternative among these strategies, and it is typically viewed as one of the least powerful among them (Epstein, 1995). This suggests, most obviously, that school councils ought to be viewed by schools as only one way of involving parents in schools. It also suggests, however, that encouraging other, more powerful school parent partnerships, might be considered a central mission for councils themselves, one which they are uniquely situated to carry out by virtue of the potential moral authority attending their parent membership.

Conditions Associated with School Council Influence

Under the best of conditions, we argued above, councils were likely to have only a weak positive influence on school and classroom practices. Nonetheless, such influence might be educationally significant; it is certainly the case that very few non-instructional innovations of any type demonstrate much more than weak positive influences on whatever is the student outcome of choice. And as part of broader decentralization programs, school councils are often promoted for reasons not considered central to this paper. So there may be good reasons for implementing councils and it is important to know what conditions support the implementation of influential councils.

Survey results indicated that the influence of school councils was only weakly related to such hard-to-manipulate variables as student SES, school size, teachers' years experience and time in school. Survey and case study data combined suggested

that council influence was positively associated with variables much more likely to change. These variables included teachers being well informed about council activities and generally positive toward school councils, a strong, active, and supportive parental presence in the school, and no trouble recruiting students, staff, and parents for council membership.

Most of these conditions have been identified in previous research (Leithwood & Menzies, in press). So there is a relatively high degree of certainty about the conditions supporting effective council implementation. Furthermore, these conditions are well within the reach of schools to create. Armed with this fairly accessible knowledge, we are inclined to view the purposes, motives and attitudes of teachers and administrators as the central challenges to council implementation, not lack of skill.

School Council Processes

In response to questions about processes used by their school's council, interviewees talked about council routines, forms of council communication, and council problem-solving processes. With respect to routines, more influential as compared with less influential councils were reported to develop and make available the agenda for upcoming meetings well in advance of such meetings, to be free of power struggles and special interest or single issue members, and to be much clearer about their roles and responsibilities. More influential councils communicated extensively with their constituents who, as a consequence, reported being well informed about council initiatives; council members served as liaison between the council and the groups they represented.

While all councils were reported to engage in similar problem-solving processes, these processes were more fully developed in councils that exercised a positive influence on school and classroom practices. This was due, in no small measure, to highly skilled council chairs - parents in all but one case, where principal and parent

co-chaired. These council chairs were reported to be highly familiar with the school, and knowledgeable about the issues facing the council. In addition, chairs of more influential councils ensured that members had access to all of the available information relevant to issues being addressed by council, and these chairs had a very clear sense of purpose. More influential councils engaged in consensual decision making whenever posssible, whereas less influential councils usually decided by majority vote.

For the most part, these results also reflect previous research. The one exception concerns the crucial role played by council chairs. Our results place considerable weight on the choice of a chair skilled in small group processes, knowledgeable about school issues and able to work in close partnership with the principal. In three of the moderate influence schools, in particular, principal and chair acted as an especially well coordinated team and this seemed to create optimal conditions for council functioning. So a skilled chair may be considered a "condition" prerequisite to the development of many of the other conditions suggested by our data.

Principal Leadership

Evidence from teachers, council members and principals suggested that leadership from principals was, in conjunction with council chairs, central to the development of influential councils. This finding mirrors much earlier evidence concerning administrators' influence in determining the role of councils in schools, and the extent of their influence on the school (e.g., Malen & Ogawa, 1988). In this study the principals' leadership served both symbolic and instrumental purposes. Symbolic purposes were served by the visible and active engagement of principals in the work of the council. This visible engagement seems likely to have been interpreted by teachers as an indication that council work was important and deserved to be taken seriously. Instrumental purposes were served when principals facilitated the development of effective council problem solving and

communication processes, and when they helped to focus those processes on educationally substantive issues.

These data add to the quite substantial body of empirical evidence now available about principal effects (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 1996). This evidence supports common claims about the importance of principal leadership in school development, although principal effects are typically more muted than the popular professional literature intimates. In the more influential schools in this study, the principal and council chair together provided a form of distributed leadership with effects unlikely to be realized through principal or chair leadership exercised independently. As we have argued elsewhere (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1998), better understanding the nature and consequences of the various forms of distributed leadership common to schools is an important direction for subsequent research in school council contexts and many other contexts, as well.

Conclusion

The title of this paper, "Do School Councils Matter", actually implies a more comprehensive inquiry about councils than we undertook. Nevertheless, our results do inform the question asked by the title, in at least a partial fashion. And it is this larger question to which we return, by way of conclusion, not restricting ourselves only to evidence from this study in framing our response .

In their analysis of decentralized management in 11 countries, Bullock and Thomas (1997) argue that accountability, efficiency, autonomy, and equity are the criteria most appropriate in judging the value of such management. As a typical component of most decentralized management initiatives, these are criteria also relevant to judgements about the value of school councils, along with effectiveness, a criterion not addressed by Bullock and Thomas even though many would argue for its preeminence. In the long run, effectiveness needs to be defined as improved student outcomes. In the short run, effectiveness may be defined as changes in

classroom practice, however, the central focus of the study reported in this paper. Changed classroom practices is a reasonable definition of effectiveness in the early stages of implementation because such changes are most likely prerequisite to later-appearing student effects.

With these five criteria in mind, then, do school councils make a difference? In addressing this question context matters: our answer reflects the Ontario context and the advisory role of such councils in that context. With this caveat in mind, the short answer is "no". School councils do not add value to the empowerment of parents, the technical work of schools, or the development of students. In terms of effectiveness, evidence from the present study suggests that, at best, the influence of councils on school and classroom practices is unlikely to be more than mildly positive. And we know from our review of previous research (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998) that there is no compelling evidence of councils, and other components of school-based management, contributing to the learning of students.

Autonomy, according to Bullock and Thomas is a question about "...who is taking more control and/or less control over decision making?" (1997, p. 41). Councils in Ontario have no official decision-making authority unless schools choose, unofficially, to award some control to their councils as at least one of the ten schools in our study appeared to be doing. That said, it is likely the case that the presence of councils erodes the autonomy of principals marginally, teachers not at all, and increases the autonomy of parents as a whole not much (other changes introduced by the Ontario government have further eroded the autonomy of both schools and parents, and councils provide no antidote to such erosion).

Using Bullock and Thomas as a guide, judging the contribution of school councils to increased accountability, raises the question "has the dialogue of acccountability improved or worsened?" (1997, p. 41). On the basis of data from this study, the response to this question is similar to our response to questions of autonomy. There is no necessary change in the dialogue of accountability. Schools

may choose to use councils as a means of more fully informing their parent communities about their initiatives. Also, they may choose to share more information about such matters as budget, staffing, administrative issues, and policy changes with their councils, and potentially, through their councils to the community at large. But this is not a requirement, and only three of the ten schools in our study had chosen that path to any significant extent. Furthermore, our earlier review of literature (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998) suggested that community-control forms of site-based management, of which parent-dominated councils are a part, were actually less likely to increase teachers' sense of accountability than were teacher-control forms (delegating to groups of teachers more of the decision- making authority typically exercised by administrators).

Equity and efficiency are the two remaining criteria that Bullock and Thomas argue ought to be the basis for judging decentralized management initiatives. School councils seem unlikely to make any necessary, positive, contribution to either criterion, with minor exceptions. On the contrary, the present study, along with our previous review of the literature, suggests that councils are associated with large additional demands on members' time and little influence on how school resources are allocated. Indeed, if efficiency were considered to be a critical goal, introducing a form of principal-control site-based management would be a more appropriate alternative (Murphy & Beck, 1995). And to the extent that councils face power struggles and parent members with a narrow range of interests, two common obstacles faced during their implementation (Leithwood & Menzies, in press), the outcome is as likely to be decisions which marginally reduce rather than increase schools' abilities to treat students equitably.

Can the implementation of school councils be justified on any grounds? We think there are two important purposes to which councils might contribute. One of these purposes is the creation of educational systems with greater internal learning capacities. In Morgan's (1986) terms, this purpose is served by the redesign of school

systems from organizations "with brains" (control from the top) to organizations which behave "as brains" (widely distributed responsibilities for solving organizational problems). To serve this purpose, school councils would become one of many contexts for problem solving much less fettered by controls imposed from the centre or top of the organization. Accomplishing this purpose would require a dramatic shift in government conceptions and enactment of policy. In Ontario, for example, the current government clearly views policy as a set of central prescriptions for local practice, even to the point of micro-managing how district and school budgets will be allocated. Increasing the internal learning and problem-solving capacities of educational systems will require governments to move much closer to an "educative" conception of policy (Leithwood, 1997). Educative policies are likely to be developed through the substantial and authentic participation of those who will have to implement it, such participation helping to create a shared understanding of why the policy is important. Educative policies also are likely to focus on primarily desirable ends, and be accompanied by opportunities and resources of use to implementors in exploring and choosing among alternative means for accomplishing such ends, as well as developing the skills required to make their chosen alternatives work in real school contexts.

A second purpose to which councils might contribute is forcefully articulated in the recent work of Judith Chapman and David Aspen (e.g., 1997). Convinced of the central importance of lifelong learning in the general welfare of future societies, their work aims to uncover the conditions needed for lifelong learning to occur on a broad scale, and with diverse members of society. In their analysis, those conditions include, among others, a seamless relationship between schools and the communities they serve, responsibility on the part of schools for the education of community members throughout their life spans, and a much more varied and flexible definition of schooling environments. Viewed from this perspective, parent-dominated councils, as in Ontario, provide schools with one of what needs

to be many opportunities for engaging with other members of the wider community in conversations about community values, life aspiration, and expectations for how education might contribute to those values and aspirations.

School councils have the potential for contributing to both internal capacity development and external community development. But these are far more ambitious purposes than are normally associated with such councils. These purposes entail approaching the work of councils differently and developing other mechanisms to complement the work of councils. Fully accomplishing these purposes will require initiatives partly outside the control of those in local schools, initiatives quite unlike those taken recently by the current government in Ontario and neo-conservative governments in many other jurisdictions. But those in local schools can choose or not choose to use councils toward such ends. And that choice will be every bit as important as the choices that will need to be made by policy-makers.

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Table 1: Relationships between school influences on teachers' work and aspects of the school

	Total Sample (N=1362)		Elementary (N=984)		Secondary (N=378)	
	Inside	Outside	Inside	Outside	Inside	Outside
Perceptions of Council and Parent Relations:						
Council Awareness	.25**	.31**	.17**	.26**	.18**	.27**
Nature of Council	.37**	.43**	.34**	.40**	.34**	.39**
Parent/School Relations	.19**	.19**	.14**	.15**	.19**	.16**
Demographics:						
Student SES	.05	-.06	.10**	.03	-.09	-.10
Staff Size	-.21**	-.18**	.08*	.01	-.05	-.06
Number of Years in School	.10**	.04	.15**	.09**	.17*	.00
Teaching Experience	.07**	.10**	.07*	.09**	.08	.11*

* - Signif.< .05 ** - Signif. < .01 (2-tailed)

Table 2: Estimates of school councils' influence based on survey data (rank ordered from most influential [1] to least influential [9])

	Influence on School		Influence on Classroom		Mean Influence		Ranking
Schools	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
H.	1.17	.98	1.40	.89	1.30	.84	1
B.	1.17	.41	.83	.75	1.00	.55	2
G.	1.00	.58	1.00	.58	1.00	.41	2
A.	.80	.84	1.00	.89	.90	.55	3
F.	.39	1.11	1.11	.68	.75	.58	4
E.	.50	.76	.75	.46	.63	.52	5
I.	.45	.69	.23	.48	.34	.49	6
C.	.18	.53	.24	.44	.21	.40	7
J.	.19	.83	-.06	.68	.06	.73	8
D.	-.27	.79	-.36	.92	-.32	.75	9

Rating Scale: +2 = Significant Positive to -2 = Significant Negative

Table 3: Estimates of school councils' influence based on interview data (rank ordered from most influential to least influential)

Schools	INFLUENCE ON SCHOOL 1. Some to a Lot of Infl. N	%	Rank (1=most)	2. No influence/ Don't Know N	%	Rank (1=fewest)	INFLUENCE ON CLASSROOM 3. Some to a Lot of Infl. N	%	Rank (1=most)	4. No influence/ Don't Know N	%	Rank (1=fewest)	Mean Ranking
H. (N=9)	9	(100)	1	0	(0)	1	7	(78)	3	2	(22)	3	2.0
F. (N=8)	5	(63)	3	3	(38)	3	7	(88)	1	1	(13)	1	2.0
G. (N=10)	8	(80)	2	2	(20)	2	6	(60)	5	4	(40)	5	3.5
A. (N=10)	5	(50)	5	5	(50)	5	8	(80)	2	2	(20)	2	3.5
E. (N=10)	6	(60)	4	4	(40)	4	7	(70)	4	3	(30)	4	4.0
I. (N=10)	5	(50)	5	5	(50)	5	2	(20)	7	8	(80)	7	6.0
J. (N=10)	6	(60)	4	4	(40)	4	0	(0)	9	10	(100)	9	6.5
D. (N=10)	3	(30)	7	7	(70)	7	3	(30)	6	7	(70)	6	6.5
C. (N=10)	4	(40)	6	6	(60)	6	1	(10)	8	9	(90)	8	7.0
B. (N=10)	1	(10)	8	9	(90)	8	0	(0)	9	10	(100)	9	8.5
Total	**52**	**(54%)**		**45**	**(46%)**		**41**	**(42%)**		**56**	**(58%)**		

Table 4: Principals' role in the school council

	H N=8	F N=7	G N=9	A N=9	E N=9	ModTot N=42	I N=9	J N=9	D N=9	C N=9	B N=9	Lo Tot N=45	Grnd Tot N=87
1. Principal is a strong, active supporter of the council, e.g., attends all meetings, worked hard to get it started, is very involved	5	2	8	4	3	22	2	6	0	3	1	12	34
2. Principal is source of information/shares everything with council, eg. budget, info about curriculum issues	5	0	8	5	6	24	8	2	4	7	8	29	53
3. Principal asks for council input about how to improve school	1	0	2	3	0	6	0	0	0	0	4	4	10
4. Principal encouraged council to focus on teaching and learning	1-	1	1	3	0	5+ 1-	2	0	0	0	2	4	9+ 1-
5. Principal went to work-shops (with parents, chair	1	0	0	2	0	3	0	2	0	1	1	4	7
6. Principal provides leadership on council, eg. gives advice, exhibits good problem solving skills	4	1	6	6	4	21	5	6	3	7	6	27	48
7. Principal has close relationship with chair/ council	2	0	4	2	2	10	2	1	0	2	1	6	16
8. Principal communicates with parents, teachers through newsletters, staff meetings, etc., about council activities	4	1	3	3	1	12	2	2	2	4	2	12	24
9. Principal takes every opportunity to make staff and teachers aware of council	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	5	0	5	7
10. Principal actively recruits participation from staff members	0	2	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	2	0	3	5
11. Principal let council know their views were important	2	0	1	1	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
12. Principal helps set agenda	4	3	8	5	0	20	4	2	3	6	5	20	40
13. Principal has final authority/key to success	5	0	2	1	0	8	1	1	1	3	1	7	15
14. Principal recruits parent/community volunteers	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	1	3	5
15. Principal presents school staffs' interests/ advocate	2	0	2	2	1	7	2	1	0	0	3	6	13
16. Principal doesn't give opinion on what's valuable	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	2
GRAND TOTAL	**36+ 1-**	**10**	**48**	**37**	**17**	**148+ 1- mean 3.5**	**29**	**24**	**14**	**42**	**35**	**144 mean 29**	